

# Working at home: French MEPs day-to-day practice of political representation in their district

Corentin Poyet

**Abstract:** In the early 2000s, Simon Hix and his colleagues declared EP constitutes a good laboratory to test theories and hypotheses about legislative or party behavior. However, scholars mainly focused on roll-call votes analysis allowing them to investigate voting behavior, coalitions formation as well as activities in technical committees. We argue that work in Parliament should not be investigated without considering constituency work. Surprisingly, despite the institutionalization of district work, only a few studies focused on micro-level linkages between MEPs and citizens. The results show that MEPs are in contacts with citizens having matter with the EU but not directly with their constituents. In the district, MEPs are more experts of the EU than members of the community. By investigating day-to-day contacts between citizens and their MEPs, this paper offers a new perspective on the debate about the democratic deficit of EP and EU institutions.

**Keywords:** European Parliament, MEPs, district work, representation, responsiveness

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## **Introduction**

This paper deals with the neglected question of the actual practice of political representation at the European level. In the context of the European Union (EU), the Parliament (EP) is the single directly popularly elected institution. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) hold a unique role in being the direct linkages between citizens and the EU institutions. Scholars' interest for the functioning of the EP is thus significant and growing; following the evolution and the increasing visibility of the EP. On the one hand, this interest leads to a better knowledge of what happens inside the EP (Hix, Noury, & Roland, 2007). However, scholars do not focus on the MEPs activities outside the EP (Farrell & Scully, 2010). Hence, despite the critical position of the EP in the process of political representation at the European level, scholars know only a little about the practices of the agents of representation.

Going outside the EP for investigating district work is not only important because of the key roles of MEPs in the representation process. District work and non-legislative tasks are becoming more visible at both the national and supranational levels following global trends. Since the end of the Cold War, literature highlights the transformation of European representative democracies characterized by the growing distrust in political institutions that do not spare the EP. The 2008 financial crisis reinforced the feeling of distrust in politics, particularly in southern Europe (Hernández & Kriesi, 2016). The linkages between citizens and political actors have become more salient, and citizens more demanding towards their representatives (Andre, Depauw, & Beyens, 2015). However, despite the work of Eulau and Karps (1977), until recently scholars adopted a restrictive definition of political representation, limiting the capacity to assess the direct link between citizens and MPs. This restriction finds its origin in the seminal theoretical work of Pitkin (1972). Representation is associated with policy congruence (Eulau & Karps, 1977); citizens are evaluating their representatives in terms

of policy similarity. It leads to an overestimation of the power of the parties in the process of political representation; Literature considers MPs as agents respecting the party discipline (Converse & Pierce, 1986) and to the omission of activities taking place outside the parliamentary chambers (Thomassen & Andeweg, 2004). Hence, despite it being an essential element of accountability, constituency service is largely ignored by scholars investigating the practice representation. At the European level, there is virtually no study about constituency work except a Ph.D. dissertation (Tomkova, 2014). Hence, this paper contributes to a better knowledge of both the political representation at the European level and of the consequences on Members of Parliaments' behavior of the evolution of citizens' demands.

Mobilizing ethnographic data, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the actual practice of political representation on the ground through the observation of French MEPs' activities in their district. According to Fenno (1978), to understand representative democracy in action, it requires to look not only at what is happening in the chamber but also to go beyond the walls of the Parliament, in the district: What do MEPs do in their districts? By investigating MEPs constituency work, this paper offers a new perspective on the debate about the democratic deficit of the EU (Moravcsik, 2002; Rittberger, 2003). It could challenge the traditional vision of MEPs disconnected from their electoral bases that would lead to a rareness of contacts between MEPs and their constituents (Clark & Rohrschneider, 2009; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1991). Hence, if this paper focuses on a particular part of MEPs' activities, it must be linked to the literature about parliamentary democracy at the European level.

## **Constituency representation at the European level: State of the art**

The process of political representation at the European level is debated through the question of a democratic deficit in the EU. Until last decades, the voluminous theoretical literature focusing on this issue contrasts with a lack of empirical investigations (Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999).

EU is particularly outstanding for understanding the multi-dimensionality and dynamic nature (Pitkin, 1972) of political representation. MEPs, coming from diverse national polities and they are under pressure from various national interests' groups. They interact each other and are subject to the multiplicity of institutional constraints. It leads to the multiplicity of allegiances and a sophisticated prioritization (Costa, 2002). Several authors investigate these allegiances focusing on diverse aspects of MEPs representational roles. The most common operationalization is related to the functionalist conception of representation (Wahlke, Eulau, & Buchanan, 1962) namely the focus and style of representation. According to Katz (1997), MEPs are more or less oriented toward the representation of national interest, European priorities, and constituency interests. However, the differences between MEPs and the determinants of the foci are not explained. The same limit can be addressed to Wessels (1999). Afterwards, Scully and Farrell (2003) find four discriminant factors: importance accorded to the representation of national party (voters); social group representation; representation of broad interests (national or European) and importance is given to the parliamentary activities. They show that MEPs prioritize they activities giving more importance to a particular "principal" (Scully & Farrell, 2003). They also tried to explain differences in how MEPs perceive their role but they failed to provide robust results, as they recognized themselves (Scully & Farrell, 2003). Brack and Costa (2013) detail the situation of French MEPs showing that focus of representation depends mainly on political orientations. They also show the difficulties in importing local issues into the EP due to institutional constraints.

These studies provide an interesting picture of MEPs' complex set of attitudes, but the link with their activities and behaviors remains unrecognized. This critic is addressed to the functionalist approach and not only to its application to MEPs. As an answer to this limit, Beauvallet and Michon (2007) illustrate the local dimensions of MEPs' behavior. They show that local ties are not sufficient to run for EP seats which depend mainly on political parties. Within the EP, institutional constraints limit the possibility to import local issues, but opportunities are set up by MEPs sharing common interests (Costa, 2001).

Other scholars provide similar results by analyzing parliamentary questions (Proksch & Slapin, 2011; Raunio, 1996). National opposition parties often use parliamentary questions at the European level as an alternative source of information (Proksch & Slapin, 2011, p. 72). Also, Costa and Brack (2014) did not find a systematic use of written questions to import local issues at the EP. The focus is mainly European. However, the authors note that Eurosceptic MEPs concentrate more on local and national issues than their colleagues.

As a result, the time spent for the district is rather short, and MEPs appear to be more influenced by their party membership and their opinion about European integration (Hix et al., 2007). However, scholars mainly focus on the work inside the EP when, as argued by Fenno (1978), parliamentary work cannot be correctly analyzed without taking into account the work outside the Parliament. Legislative work and district work are two sides of the same coin. Scholars overlook this part of MEPs work despite its institutionalization (turquoise weeks may be dedicated to district work).

Hence, the literature gives various incentives to explore MEPs district work. The institutional constraints limit the possibilities to take advantage of parliamentary instruments to offer constituency service. To assure a connection with their constituents, they must work differently, and activities in the district can be one solution. In France, this pattern is observed at the national level. The literature considers the weakness of the house as a key element explaining why MPs focus more on district work than on their legislative tasks (Costa & Kerrouche, 2009; Costa & Poyet, 2016). Also, the institution itself incites MEPs to spend time in their district by organizing weeks that can be dedicated to district work (but not only). Despite this double incentive and a real interest in the question of parliamentary representation at the European level, the literature surprisingly neglected this aspect of MEPs work. The purpose of this article is thus to fill this gap by investigating the day-to-day contacts between MEPs and their constituents.

### **French MEPs district work: Theoretical expectations**

Before presenting the hypotheses about MEPs district work, the first section discusses the factors inciting MEPs to develop ties in their district. The assumption is that MEPs are not subject to the same incentives than MPs and that this difference will lead to a different practice of district work.

#### *Incentives to offer constituency service*

The literature considers that district work is an answer to an electoral incentive. MPs spend time in their constituency to develop their reputation that can be translated into an electoral resource (Carey & Shugart, 1995). The European elections are regionalized, and the system differs from one member-state to another even if the proportional base is present in all countries. In France, the electoral system for European elections is proportional with closed-list and large district

magnitude. Hence, this system does not give incentives for cultivating personal vote and, thus, to spend time in the district (Carey & Shugart, 1995; Dudzinska, Poyet, Costa, & Wessels, 2015). However, when the number of parties is high, candidates, mainly seniors, and frontbenchers, are invited by their party to develop ties in their districts. The gain is, thus, not individual but collective (Uslaner, 1985). Also, European Parliament might be considered by politicians as a step before running for local or national elections (Scarrow, 1997; van Geffen, 2016). In France, other elections require strong local ties regardless the level of governance. Hence, MEPs may find a strategic incentive for spending time in the district (Høyland, Hobolt, & Hix, 2017).

In addition to the career factors, the institutional design is a constraint that limits the possibility to import local issues in the EP; constituency work may be an answer to the lack of democratic legitimacy of the EP. Hence, it can increase MEPs responsiveness and legitimacy as well as, indirectly, the EP's one (Costa, 2001). The institutional constraint *inside* the EP constitutes, thus, an opportunity for MEPs to develop local ties *outside* the chamber. More than being an answer to incentives from the electoral system, constituency service is a response to the weakness of the EP. If MEPs do not need to hunt personal votes for winning the next election, other incentives coexist and justify an exploration of constituency work. Moreover, since district work is dedicated to aiming other goals, it would be different from their national counterparts who must secure their reelection.

#### *French MEPs activities in their district: Research hypotheses*

Because of the lack of studies about MEPs district work, the theoretical expectations will be driven by studies investigating national MPs constituency activities as well as by an inductive reasoning.

In France, the primary activity in the district is casework namely when MPs take care of citizens individual issues (Costa & Poyet, 2016). As argued by Kerrouche (2009), MPs and their staff are considered as last chance administrative shelter for housing, working and financial problems. In the EP, Michon (2008) looks at the treatment of individuals' solicitations by MEPs and their collaborators. He shows that individual issues (housing, employment) observed in MPs emails are not relevant here. Also, Beauvallet and Michon (2007) show that MEPs spend time for casework, but the frequency of this activity remains overlooked. Two different expectations may occur: First, the irrelevance of individual issues might indicate that MEPs are not a last chance administrative shelter, neither inside the EP nor in their district. Second, it is also expected that individual issues are irrelevant in mails because they are processed in the district during specific appointments. However, this argument would be incorrect since the recent literature shows that casework is moving from meetings at politicians' office to online demands (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). Hence, the expectation is (H1): *by contrast to national MPs, French MEPs will devote limited time for casework and surgeries.*

The second activity in the district is the social events. In these activities, which are mainly festive and commemorative, MPs are not solicited as they are for surgeries. Social events are strongly related to the seniority and experience of MPs. Norton and Wood (1990) argue that junior MPs have more incentives than the previous generation due to the stronger expectations of citizens. After a first period of "incumbency" during which MPs devote a considerable share of time in the constituency, MPs have only to maintain their electoral base (Fenno, 1978). Also, because of a lack of time, senior and high resourced MPs will not assure this presence themselves but through their collaborators and a professional communication (newsletter, media, and social networks). Social events are firstly symbolic since they allow the MPs to



show that they are members of the community composing the district (Eulau & Karps, 1977). MPs try thus to visit the different places of their district and to participate in a variety of events. Then, in the context of the EP, there is no objective reason to argue that MEPs will have different behavior. The hypothesis is thus: (H2) *French MEPs devote much time in participating in social events.*

Third, maybe more important in the context of EP is the link with social and interests' groups. In France, MPs contacts with these groups in the constituency are rather limited. These activities represent only 9% of the time spent in the district by French MPs (Costa & Poyet, 2016). In the case of the EP, the expectation is that these meetings are much more frequent than in the national context. Two reasons explain this expectation: first, interest groups and lobbying have a real and measured impact on MEPs preferences (Eising, 2007; Marshall, 2010). If this influence takes place mainly inside the EP, MEPs may also play the game in the district with local groups. Second, the EU may be a financial contributor for local projects integrating social groups like sports clubs or cultural organizations. Also, the same pattern is expected with political groups, parties, and local governments. The EU is also a provider of a financial fund designated to cities and regions. MEPs can play a moderator role between local administration and the EU. The local parties may also incite MEPs to provide this support to the municipalities they control. Hence, MEPs may play the role of moderator between these groups and the European administration. The role is not only to support for preparing an application. MEPs can then defend these requests. Unfortunately, the empirical design of this paper, focusing on district work, will not be able to appreciate the last step of the process. However, previous literature already highlighted these form of pork-barrel politics (Scholl, 1985). Hence, the third hypothesis is (H3) *contacts with local and social and political groups are frequent in the district.*

Finally, a top-down process may also occur when MEPs spend time in their district (Beauvallet & Michon, 2007). Top-down means all activities by which MEPs represent the parliamentary institution. In France, at the national level, this process is rather limited even if it exists. Information meetings are organized at on a regular basis by most of MPs (Costa & Poyet, 2016). At the European level, in a context of lack of legitimacy, it is expected that these activities are much more developed than at the national level: (H4) *a high frequency of events like information meeting, visit school and visit to the industrial actors.*

## **Data and method**

The paper will use the data compiled in the IMPLOC project, coordinated by Olivier Costa and Jean-Benoit Pilet. Its ambition is to investigate the actual practice of representation through MPs' and MEPs constituency work. The project adopts a comparative perspective mobilizing data from France and Belgium, but, here, only the French data are considered. Between 2012 and 2013, 53 MPs (50) and MEPs (3) have been observed during two consecutive days when they are in their constituency. Since the empirical design is qualitative, the necessity of a robust representative sample is not required. However, the three selected MEPs are very different in terms of gender (two men and one woman), party membership (one member of the EPP, one of the ALDE and one of the S&D) and seniority (one MEP is a newcomer, one starts his second term, and the third was reelected three times). Concerning MEPs, the dataset compiles 21 events grouped in eleven categories.

The qualitative methodological framework is double. It mobilizes moderate participant observation completed with an interview. Observation allows investigating the reality of the contacts with citizens. A systematic approach is adopted with the application of a strict protocol.

Observers fill a particular document for each event indicating its content. This approach has a double advantage: First, MEPs may adopt different behavior regarding the situation (Fenno, 1978). By always evaluating MEPs behavior on the same precise criteria our sample can deal with this. Second, it facilitates the comparison between MEPs. The typology of events is based on previous studies about French and German MPs through the CITREP project (Costa & Poyet, 2016). Our hypotheses are based on these categories. For each event and each MEP, the observer describes the observation by pointing all interesting behavioral features of MEPs which cannot be added to the above document. The objective is also to retrieve all informal discussions between MEPs, their collaborators and other actors that cannot be considered as events.

The interviews complete the observations. Their goal is to understand the opinion MEPs have about their work. The mixed-method approach using in this paper has one advantage: the mutual complementarity between the two methods. Observation allows the researchers to investigate the reality of constituency work, but the meaning of the activities remain hard to understand. On the other hand, scholars may understand the meaning given by MEPs to their activities.

A comparison with French national MPs is provided in the tables and figure. It helps to highlight the specificity of MEPs district work.

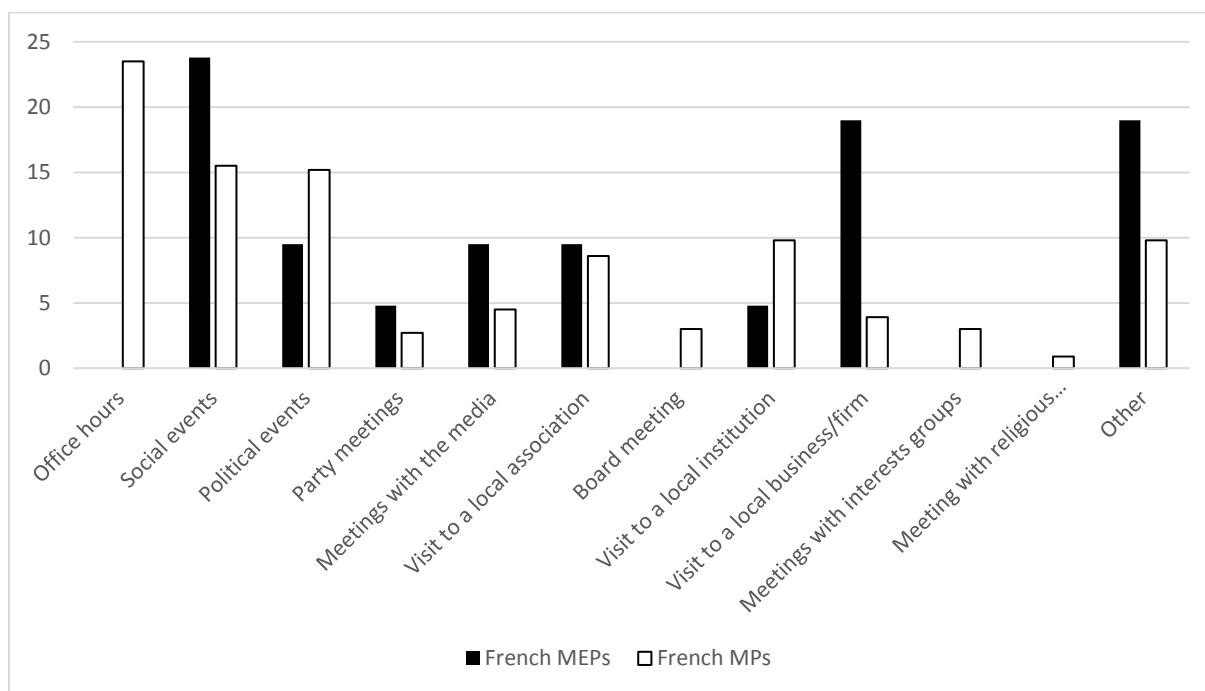
### **Empirical results**

Despite the heterogeneity of the activities, MEPs district work is rather homogeneous, and all MEPs organize their district work along the same line. Globally, the hypotheses find support. Overall, it appears that French MEPs district work is different to what it is observed at the

national level in France. The detailed analysis will highlight a practice of representation which is, to some degree, exclusive even if it does not seem this is intentional.

### *MEPs as an insiders' representatives*

Figure 1: Activities in the district



Source: CITREP/IMPLOC projects. N=357. Numbers are percentages

Figure 1 summarizes the type of events that were observed. The first result is the absence of appointments with citizens (for solving individual issues) when it is the most frequent activity among national MPs. Five reasons may explain this lack: First, the size of the district leads to a limited accessibility to the MEP. As observed at the national level, surgeries are not as frequent in large rural districts as they are in the small urban ones (Costa & Poyet, 2016). Compared to rural national constituencies, the districts for European elections are much bigger; leading to a stronger effect of this factor. Second, casework may take place outside the surgeries as, for example, during a visit to a firm. These *decentralized* surgeries are observed with an

MEP [S&D] visiting farms in her district. Farmers asked questions about the mechanisms of attribution of EU subventions. Finally, appointments with MEP's collaborator are fixed. Third, surgeries become more-and-more virtual through social networks and emails since it is free and effortless (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). The increasing number of emails received by MEPs is pointed by Michon (2008). The size of the districts might also reinforce this factor. However, this argument must be balanced: according to Michon (2008), each MEP receives, in average, about ten emails relative to individual issues every week. This number reaches a hundred or so for French MPs (Kerrouche, 2009). Fourth, collaborators may also directly manage these requests. Hence, citizens do not meet MEPs themselves even if the gain produced by "their" help would contribute to their reputation. However, These "practical" explanations which are rather common in the literature (Kerrouche, 2009) are not relevant here or, at least, are not sufficient. A fifth explanation is given by MEPs who explain that Europe is far in the citizens' considerations:

*They [citizens] are happy when I come to meet them, but the EP itself is far. It is a soil-less plant. [...] They occasionally come to my office... However, anyway... Europe is far. If I would not be elected to an intercommunal council, if I would not be a basic activist, I guess they would not care. Really!* [ALDE, Man]

*"On a term, if I meet nearby let's say 15'000 people in total, that is the maximum. It has no tangible reality. The district itself has no tangible reality."* [ALDE, Man]

As argued by Van Ingelgom (2014), a significant share of citizens is indifferent regarding the EU, and these sentences tend to show that this indifference also affects MEPs. MPs are a last-chance administrative shelter (mainly to solve unemployment and housing issues), but MEPs

are not or, precisely, not in the same way. The observations show this is a shelter for initiated citizens. Those who have a matter with the European Union like the farmers introduced above. Hence, even if the MEPs' office doors are open (rather all of them have at least one collaborator in the district), they are not a contact person in their district for individual matters. Informal talks with MEPs also highlight the relative indifference of citizens toward them. The observer spent two hours with one MEP in his office in the district for the interview and did not see anybody coming in the office while it was officially open.

In line with the second hypothesis, Figure 1 shows that social events are the most frequent activities. The original definition of the events reflects their diversity. It can be a local celebration in a small town but also the opening of a new building (museum, library). They have a symbolic impact for MPs who can show to their constituents that they are members of the community. MPs try to go everywhere it is possible and to participate in every yearly event at least once a term. The first look on table one may give the impression that the pattern is similar for MEPs but a detailed look shows this not the case since the criterion of diversity is not met.

MEPs did not attend any local events that are not related to the EU. Public apparitions of MEPs are observable only when the events have an European content. The events are the visit of the *Village Européen* – an annual event organized in one of the biggest city in the country –, a public speech about Europe during a debate hosted by an association just after the *Village Européen*, an active participation in an open conference about the monetary union and, finally, a questions and answers game following this conference played with students. The literature about MPs district work does not relate similar pattern among national MPs who are much more present to local events even if they are disconnected from their initial function. In the interviews,

the absence of MEPs of most of the local celebrations is not confirmed even if MEPs remain evasive:

*“There are many initiatives both political and associative, in every direction, where our presence may be required: in street demonstrations, colloquium or forum.” [EPP, Man]*

Beauvallet and Michon (2007) do not propose local-related social and festive events in their catalog. The observations confirm this point. MEPs do not participate in those events, and the empirical design cannot explain this. MEPs are observed in very different situations. For example, one stayed in the main city of the district when another was observed in a very rural part of her district. A third MEP was not focused on a part of his district but moved from one corner to another during the two days of observation. Hence, regarding the diversity of practices, if attendance in social events were a reality, it would have been observed. Also, the observers of national MPs do not relate the presence of MEPs during social events, even at the biggest ones. This result goes against the literature that emphasizes these symbolic activities not only for electoral purposes but also because they give the opportunity for MPs to examine the wills and the needs of their constituents.

The situation of MEPs in their district may explain this result. Contrary to MPs, they are avoidable when a social event is organized; the capital gained with the presence of MEPs, for the organizer, is rather limited. The question of electoral gain for MEPs remains open, but if referring to the theory of personal vote (Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 2013), such activities procure only limited advantages. According to Norris (2004), the electoral system makes MEPs accountable to their party and not directly to the voters. However, the explanation is not sufficient. In Germany, for example, some MPs are elected through a comparable electoral

system, but their participation to such of local celebrations is real and similar to French MPs practice (Costa & Siefken, 2014). MEPs themselves say that is important but difficult:

*“Everything is played out based on public existence in the sense of recognition. On public political existence. So of course, there is also political representation, but that is not enough either. Anyway, we always toiled, and we will toil again!”* [Man, EPP]

The results show that the indifference towards MEPs explains the different pattern. On the one hand, for the organizers of events, the presence of MEPs is not a promise of success. On the contrary, for the MEPs, participating in local events is not relevant since voters do not recognize most of them.

#### *Representing and importing Europe in the district*

The traditional explanatory patterns of district work do not apply for French MEPs. It does not mean that the view of district work as service and symbolic responsiveness (Eulau & Karpis, 1977) is not relevant but that these components of representative's tasks are differently performed. There is a form of exclusivity which is not intentional. The secondary nature of the European mandate and the indifference of citizens towards MEPs lead to a very particular practice of political representation. MEPs are in contact with citizens interested in the EU and organize their district work relating to EU affairs. Hence, more than being a last-chance administrative shelter, French MEPs are the representative of the EU in their district. Only citizens and institutions that have a matter with the EU keep in touch with MEPs and *vice versa*. One MEP focuses on agriculture, and cattle/pig farms. These sectors have a considerable role in the local economy and directly and indirectly hire a significant share of workers. Also, they become increasingly dependent on the EU, mainly through the CAP. Similarly, free trade



agreements within the EU and between the EU and other countries affect these sectors (Carter & Smith, 2008). The observer notes that the goal of the visits was to learn more about the actual situation of the farmers and the consequence of EU policies.

Beyond this illustration, the observations and interviews also show that contacts with social and political groups are frequent. MEPs are a contact-person to deal with EU matters not only for social groups but also and mainly for political groups:

*“I am obliged to reply here and there but primarily on European funding issues to meet their [associations and local political institutions] demands. I work a lot with the manager of the European funding systems in the city of [xzy<sup>1</sup>].” [Woman, S&D]*

The data also show that these meetings are not necessarily formal and do not take place in MEPs office but mainly during other events. For example, one party meeting was the opportunity to talk about various EU funding programs that may be useful to develop a public transportation system in an agglomeration of the district. The local representatives solicited the meeting, and it was the opportunity for the MEP to present what the EU can do for local communities. In a certain extent, a large part of district work is dedicated to assisting local groups and political institution in their matter with the EU. This task is applied in various types of events and not only in formal meetings as expected in the third hypothesis. This example also shows the role of the party as a platform allowing meetings between elected politicians even if it is not a necessary factor. More studies would be required, but the interviews and the observations tend to show that the party is a constant in meetings between MEPs and local politicians. MEPs tend to meet individuals sharing the same interests firstly:

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<sup>1</sup> The second most important city in the district. The MEP was elected in this city before starting her career in the EP.

*“On this topic, I usually prepare my votes with other MEPs, with the lobbies of the food industry... However, this time, also with citizens and the “Confédération Paysanne”<sup>2</sup>, I spent two or three hours talking with four farmers who wanted to present me their opinion about my position. However, this is rare... Normally, the local, the district... We focus on specific topics, at a specific place.” [Man, ALDE]*

This result fits with previous literature. Michon (2008, p. 12) also shows that the treatment of demands from the civil society is dependent on the share of a common political network. MEPs tend to reserve a more positive answer to individuals they know. The proximity may not be only ideological, but this factor is important.

More generally, the data portray a double process: First, there is a bottom-up practice of political representation: the district is a source of information (and local requests) for MEPs. However, according to the previous literature, this information is not directly processed in their legislative and control tasks to defend the interests of the district in a strict sense (Brack & Costa, 2013). Further studies are needed to know what extent district work may lead to specific requests directly to the Commission and other EU agencies; behind the closing doors of meeting rooms (pork-barrel politics).

Second, there is a top-down process through a hard communication about the work in the EP. For example, an important farmers union organized a public meeting to allow a MEP to present her successes and failures on this issue. Also, the data show that MEPs are also used as a communication channel from the EU to the citizens and social groups. In a context of lack of

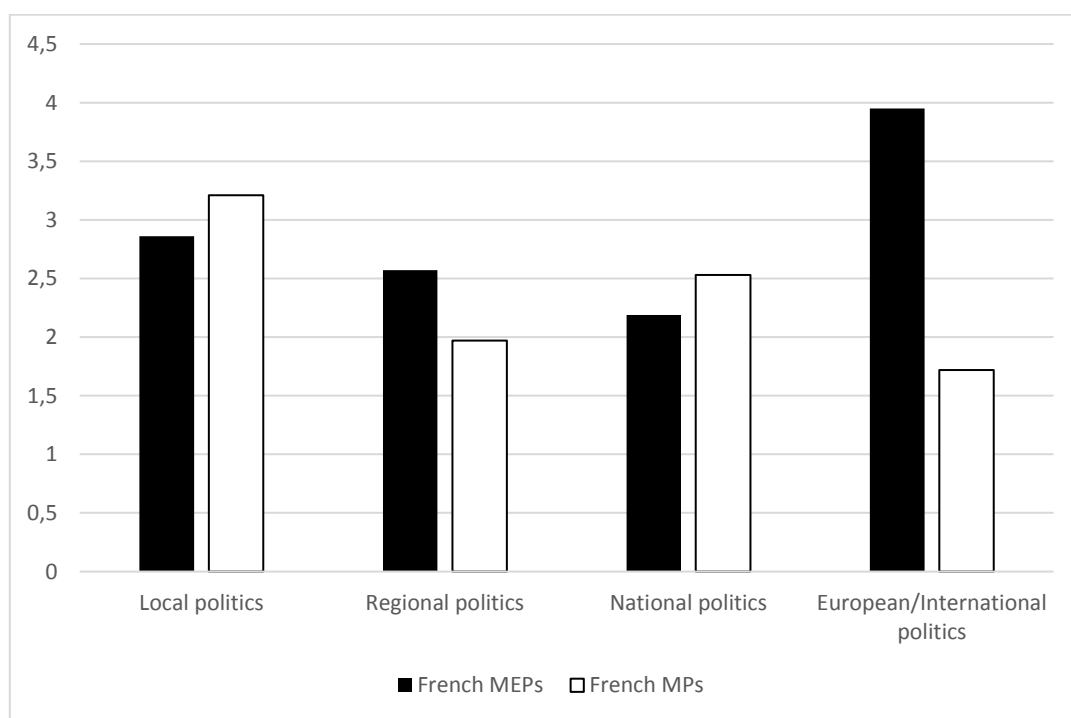
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<sup>2</sup> A farmers syndicate

legitimacy, MEPs play the role of EU-spokesperson with the citizens. This *teaching Europe* role was variously observed: an interview by a graduate student, a visit to a school, speaker in a conference, etc. Most are initiated by the citizens or by local institutions and mainly by schools.

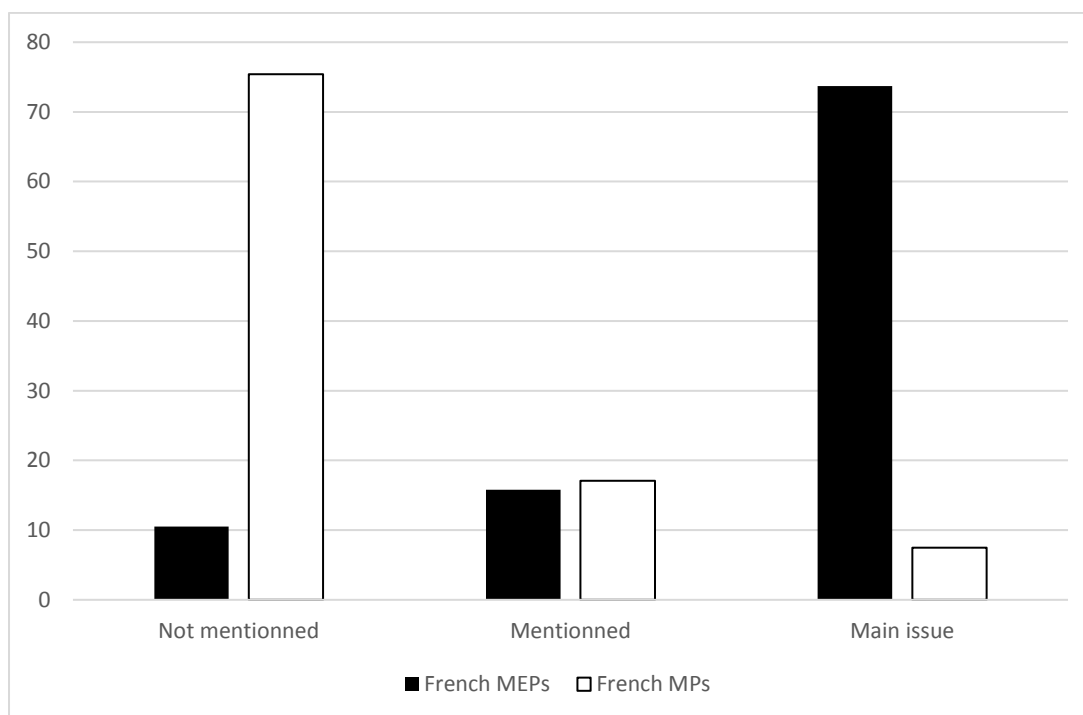
In both processes, the EU is the main discussed issue (figures 2 and 3). It means that the MEPs are invited to talk about the EU and that MEPs organize their district work with a strong focus on EU matters. There are only two events where the EU was not mentioned namely a party meeting (at the time of the fieldwork, one MEP was a party leader) and a private meeting with former colleagues from the municipal council of a large city. At the national level, this strong connection between district work and political agenda is not observed. French MPs rarely evoke issues that are on the legislative agenda (Costa & Poyet, 2016).

Figure 2: Average importance of political contents (1 to 5)



Source: CITREP and IMPLOC projects. N=357.

Figure 3: The place of the EU in activities in the district



Source: CITREP and IMPLOC projects. N=357. Numbers are percentages

At least in France, MEPs are the representative of the EU in their districts. They do not take part in the cultural life of their district as national MPs do but are solicited when an event is “EU compatible.” As displayed in figure 3, the shape of the EU is observed during almost all (89.5 percent) activities. Similarly, they organize their work in the district about issues for which the EP are competent. They offer constituency service but only in limited policy areas while national MPs are solicited for problems for which the national parliament is not competent. In that respect, MEPs district work is distinct since they do not maintain strong ties with the whole constituents. If they bring their expertise when they are in the district, MEPs also bring Europe. It is a manner to become popular at the local level (and thus a credible potential candidate for a further election). More than a member of the community, MEPs is an

expert and become unavoidable thanks to their abilities to import Europe at the local level and to assist specific constituents with EU-related queries.

To sum up our results, three hypotheses on four find empirical support. According to the first assumption, French MEPs do not spend time for surgeries, but service may be offered during other activities. The second hypothesis is also verified with caution. MEPs are strongly involved in social events. However, they participate only to events having a link with Europe. MEPs do not take part in local celebrations as national MPs do. In that respect, it confirms previous studies (Tomkova, 2014). MEPs favor large events instead of individual meetings with citizens. According to the fourth hypothesis, a large share of events is dedicated to the communication about MEPs work and EU functioning. They are frequently invited to talk about the EU. The third hypothesis does not meet a total support even if it is not rejected. MEPs help social and political groups, but it does not take place in formal meetings.

### **Concluding remarks**

Scholars became increasingly interested in MEPs' behavior but overlooked their activities in the district despite their importance for legislative work. The goal of this paper was to investigate MEPs day-to-day practice of political representation.

The analyses suggest that MEPs district work is strongly connected to their European status. In their district, MEPs are the experts on European affairs more than members of the community. MEPs are moderators who facilitate the relationship between citizens and the EU. They are facilitators who can deal with the complexity of the EU.

For the debate about the democratic deficit of the EU, this paper brings a new perspective. District work is not disconnected from the parliamentary work and the traditional tasks of MEPs. It is both an input (information) and output (communication) for parliamentary tasks. The observations and the interviews suggest that MEPs do not suffer from a lack of legitimacy. Citizens who have a direct and strong matter with the EU can deal with MEPs. Also, MEPs are present to explain the work in the EP to the people. However, it remains a significant share of citizens who do not meet or even see their MEPs. In that respect, this article shows that even by taking district work into account, the democratic deficit of the EU is still a reality. Moreover, this article demonstrates that, to some degree, only citizens who are able or want to have contact with MEPs are represented when virtually all of them may have a matter with the EU.

The question of the symbolic responsiveness of MEPs remains open. In the district, the contacts with citizens are nevertheless limited. MEPs are not invited to social events and do not seem to participate by themselves. Also, despite the presence of collaborators in the district, surgeries are not observed. Except for citizens having a particular matter with the EU, MEPs are not in contact with individuals as national MPs are. It means that district work does not compensate the lack of responsiveness observed during the sessions of the EP (or in the written questions). One would explain this result by the lack of electoral incites. Since the personal vote is scared in European elections, MEPs should not need to develop strong local ties. However, this argument does not find support in this paper since MEPs regret the lack of direct contacts with citizens. More probably, the citizen's indifference towards the EU creates a gap between MEPs expectations and citizens demands. One MEP says:

*“It [the EP] represents the citizens whatever they may be. I think it represents them fairly well. However, the citizens are not aware of this. Even sometimes we represent them so well*

*that we discuss things that I do not think we should consider because it is not in the public interest.” [Man, ALDE]*

Finally, the proper of responsiveness is the translation of citizens expectations into the representatives’ work. On that point, further studies are necessary since literature knows which tools MEPs do not use (parliamentary questions) for responsiveness towards the district purpose, the question of what MEPs concretely do with the information they gather from the district remains open. A detailed look at the work in committee may be necessary since the previous literature already showed the role of the district in the assignment process (Bowler & Farrell, 1995).

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